

## Blog 1 - British Museum exhibition review – ABINGDON Classics Dpt End of Term Departmental Jolly!

### **Luxury and Power: Persia to Greece**

The Western portrayal of the East as exotic (and therefore decadent and easily defeated) has a long history, stretching back to Aeschylus' *Persians*; the well-designed exhibition at the BM makes clever use of (mainly) its own Greek and Persian collections to blur the East/West boundaries in terms of desire for luxury and the use of it to project power. Since this exhibition is about challenging past narratives, it is fitting that the way it is itself arranged sets a strong narrative; the room is divided into three, each division a theme (Persian luxury, Athenian democracy, Alexander and the Hellenistic kingdoms); the two liminal spaces between feature brief video accounts of the key military interactions between Persia and Greece: The Persian invasions and Alexander's conquest of Persia. Both of these conflicts were represented in Greek sources as the victory of hardy Greeks over Persians corrupted by luxury, with the added peril of those Greeks (like Alexander) turning soft as a result of the encounter.



Many of the items in the exhibition are owned by the British Museum; some were like old friends in a different context, while others made me wonder why I hadn't seen them before they were so beautiful and interesting. It astounded me afresh what an incredible collection the BM has that it could single-handedly resource an exhibition of such verve. Of the exhibits from elsewhere, the Panagyurishte treasure is breath-taking in its beauty, and with a backstory that could make it a future mystical artefact in an Indiana Jones film. Since you would have to go to Bulgaria to see this normally, it is much more convenient and cheaper to see it in this exhibition. The gold rhytons

also make a fitting climax to the narrative of the exhibition, since they fuse Persian luxury dining culture (as illustrated in the first of the rooms) with Greek culture, since the rhytons depict various Greek myths; their provenance is uncertain, but they date from the Hellenistic period in Thrace where the fusion of East and West reached its apogee in the courts of the Hellenistic princes. The details were delightful: a head popping out from behind the one of the seven gates of Thebes in a depiction of the Seven against Thebes, or the carefully incised names of the goddesses at the judgement of Paris (the commentary suggesting this as evidence for a Thracian court



not entirely au fait with the Greek myths! This was enlivened by the observation that the amphora-rhyton had two spouts to allow the host and visiting chief to share the same wine and prevent suspicions of poison).



I was particularly struck by the use of artefacts to demonstrate the Athenian preoccupation with luxury despite harping on about how democracy eschewed such inequality. I discovered Persian luxury entering Athenian culture under the radar, including 'Athenian' rhytons, pots designed to mimic the Persian gold and silver designs of the Persians and even a fascinating attitude towards the ultimate Persian luxury animal, the peacock: apparently one Athenian aristocrat combined luxury with democratic sentiments by putting his birds of public display for one day a month. The suggestion was that though the Athenians liked to portray the Persians as trouser wearing softies, they very much aspired to adopt their lifestyles.



There are too many lovely items and details to record here, but one of my favourites were in the room dedicated to Alexander and the 'Orientalisation' of both Alexander and later Macedonian rulers of Persia. Adopting Persian luxury was a key way to secure power for Alexander and his successors, even if Greek historians of the time thought that he was selling out. There was a lovely Babylonian cuneiform tablet recording the important day of Alexander's death with the Michael Fish-esque line: 'It was cloudy'. So much of the final room on Alexander picked up the first room on Persian

luxury: a portrayal of Alexander as pharaoh, to match with the one of Darius I as pharaoh – the message was clear: Alexander the Greek was also the last Achaemenid, using exactly the same sort of power-plays.

